



Badger cull plans for England unveiled

Government sets out proposals for a badger cull despite reports suggesting it may not stop the spread of bovine TB

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The government has challenged farmers in England to put their money where their mouths are and pay for the culling of badgers in the fight against tuberculosis in cattle. But the proposals to license farmers to kill badgers, published today, have been dismissed as "scientifically among the worst options they could have chosen" by the leading UK's leading badger ecologist.

The cull could start in May 2011 and as many as 6,000 badgers would be shot in the first year, according to officials who devised the proposals. A cull is certain to be controversial and the farming minister, Jim Paice, said he expected to face legal challenges and "some aggravation" during the culls, adding he had been in contact with the Home Office over policing of the culls. In July, legal action by the Badger Trust halted a planned cull in Wales.

"This is a very, very nasty disease of livestock and since the 1970s it has spread dramatically," said Paice, adding it had a devastating impact on farmers. "We can't go on like this, it's as simple as that." In 2009, the government spent £63m on compensating farmers for TB outbreaks and testing for the disease, which led to the slaughter of 25,000 cattle in the west and southwest of England.

But Dr Rosie Woodroffe, a badger ecologist at the Institute of Zoology in London and who worked for decade on the largest ever UK study of badger culling, said: "I think it is scientifically among the worst options they could have chosen."

The government culling study, which ran from 1998-2007 and was conducted by the Independent Scientific Group (ISG), specifically considered licensing farmers in its final report, she said, and concluded: "We consider it likely that licensing farmers to cull badgers would not only fail to achieve a beneficial effect, but would entail a substantial risk of increasing the incidence of cattle TB and spreading the disease."

This would be because previous scientific studies have found culling is only effective if carried out over large areas and several years in a consistent and co-ordinated way, because small culls drive badgers into neighbouring areas and increase TB infections. "But there doesn't seem to be any way [in the proposals] to stop farmers dropping out and I think this is very likely," she said. The proposal document itself notes that in the scenarios examined by the government, farmers who carry out culling would be worse off financially than if they had done nothing and accepted some losses to TB. It also acknowledges the risk of farmers dropping out.

"The government are very clear they have dismissed culling and vaccinating badgers themselves as too expensive," said Woodroffe. Paice denied the proposals were selected on the basis of low cost - "practically nil to the taxpayer" - saying instead the plan was "the most cost-effective way of doing it". Defra officials accepted the proposals contain no sanctions for farmers that fail to abide by the conditions of their licences: "Sanctions will be explored through the consultation."

The proposals were welcomed by the National Farmers Union as a "major step forward". Kevin Pearce, NFU head of food and farming said: "Some farmers will say no [to paying for the culls], saying the government has caused this problem and so they need to clean it up. But the majority will accept the government's economic situation. They are so frustrated by TB which is totally out of control."

But Hillary Benn, shadow secretary of state for environment, condemned the cull plan. "This is the wrong decision. Bovine TB has a devastating effect on farmers' herds and their livelihoods. But badger culling has already been tried. Based on these trials, the ISG concluded [in 2007] that 'badger culling cannot meaningfully contribute to the future control of cattle TB'."

The RSPCA also rejected the new cull proposals, noting that in the last public consultation 95% of respondents were opposed. The proposals published by the department for environment, farming and rural affairs for consultation would allow farmers to apply to Natural England for a licence to cull or vaccinate badgers, or both. Conditions of the licence would not allow badgers to be gassed, snared or poisoned, which are deemed inhumane, but would allow free-running badgers to be shot, or caught in cages and then shot. Culling would not be allowed in late winter and early spring to avoid cubs being orphaned and culling would not be allowed to lead to local extinction. There are an estimated 300,000 badgers in the UK.

Government scientists today said the latest analysis of the 1998-2007 trial showed that the incidence of TB in cattle in the culling areas was still lower than before culling. They also said that the rise seen in surrounding areas, caused by fleeing badgers, had dissipated.

To limit the risk of causing badgers to flee culls and drive up TB infections in cattle, the proposals require a cull area of at least 150km², which would involve 80-100 farms on average, and to be repeated at least annually for four years. Officials say their preferred option is for

culling to be combined with badger vaccination, but there is no requirement to vaccinate, a much more expensive option than free shooting.

"We don't expect a flood of licence applications - we'd expect 4-5 areas in first year," said a Defra TB expert. Each area would see 800-1200 badgers culled every year, Defra estimates.

Paice said he believed that control measures in cattle, along with culling and vaccination in badgers, could see TB eradicated from England within 20 years. He highlighted the prospect within 5-6 years of an oral vaccine for badgers, which would be much easier to administer than the current injectable vaccine, and a similar vaccine for cattle.

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